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August 17, 2017

Honorable Jose L. Alva, Presiding Judge
San Joaquin County Superior Court
180 West Weber Avenue, Suite 1306
Stockton, CA 95202

Re: City of Lodi Response to Grand Jury Report: Countywide Dispatch for Fire

Dear Members of the Grand Jury and Honorable Presiding Judge Alva,

The City of Lodi (Lodi) appreciates the San Joaquin County Civil Grand Jury's investment of time in preparing and has reviewed Report titled "Countywide Dispatch for Fire *Two Are Not Always Better than One*, 2016-2017 Case No. 0616" (Report). The Lodi City Council reviewed the Report and authorized this response at its regular meeting on August 16, 2017.

COMMENTS ON BACKGROUND

Lodi recognizes the Grand Jury had limited time to review and learn the different operational needs, requirements, standard fire ground procedures and practices that larger multi-unit fire agencies have in their urban/suburban response areas compared to the smaller one unit two person county fire units. Unfortunately these inherent limitations caused many of their conclusions to be mistaken and their findings to be flawed.

While there are differences in the governance of the two fire dispatch centers in San Joaquin County, private "for profit" vs. a public agency, the report does not correctly characterize the provision of dispatch services by the San Joaquin County Regional Fire Dispatch Authority (SJCRFDA). The Report characterizes Stockton's dispatch infrastructure as nearing "End-of-Life" without recognizing three important facts: 1) the technology used in dispatch operations has a very short life cycle; 2) aged out technology is a fact common to all agencies utilizing CAD technology; and 3) SJCRFD has an active and funded project to replace the technology.

SJCRFDA is a joint powers authority formed to be the County's Regional Fire Dispatch Center. A center that has focused on continual improvement in providing the highest level of service to the residents of San Joaquin County. Our goal has always been to raise the

bar in fire dispatch communications, improve efficiency, provide rapid professional response to emergencies, and enhance safety for the firefighters and the citizens we have the honor to serve.

COMMENTS ON DISCUSSION

The "Discussions, Findings and Recommendations" section of the Report states that the "vast majority of fire agencies are in favor of a single county wide emergency fire dispatch center". While this fact is true, it misses the point. Notwithstanding that there are a greater number of jurisdictions that favor Valley Regional Emergency Communication Center (VRECC); they comprise a collection of the smallest and often volunteer staffed jurisdictions in the County. Jurisdictions serving the vast majority of calls for emergency service in San Joaquin County (80%) favor staying with the San Joaquin County Regional Fire Dispatch model. Those jurisdictions include Lodi, Stockton, Manteca, Tracy, and the Lathrop/Manteca Fire District. If numbers alone weight the decision between VRECC and SJCRFD, they weight it toward the public dispatch model. Of course numeric alone is rarely dispositive of an argument. Therefore, it is significant to note that all five full time fire departments staffed with nationally credentialed Fire Chiefs support the public dispatch model. In addition, the Grand Jury fails to recognize that the small county service area fire districts are forced to prioritize cost over efficiency and public safety because they are an ill funded and long term financially unsustainable fire service model.

Second, the report only discusses the Sonoma County REDCOM dispatch Center as an example. REDCOM, like VRECC is operated by AMR. The Grand Jury did not mention or consider the many successful public agency dispatch models that operate on the same platform as SJCRFDA. Sacramento County, Stanislaus County, Alameda County, and Contra Costa County all have high performing regional dispatch centers that were used as a model for our regional center here in San Joaquin County.

While it is also true that VRECC (which is located in Stanislaus County) recently secured the accreditation referenced in the Grand Jury Report, that accreditation does not require dispatch centers to meet the national standards for call processing times. The Operation Agreement between the SJCRFDA and the City of Stockton requires Stockton dispatch to meet the national standards for call processing times or face fines, penalties, assessments, or termination of the Agreement.

The Report discusses the vast differences in cost per call between VRECC and SJCRFDA. However, the Report fails to identify additional charges for maintenance of equipment and infrastructure imposed by VRECC. It also fails to recognize that VRECC's cost would go up considerably if the larger city fire agencies joined and brought with them an additional 80,000 calls for service annually. The need for additional office space, channels, frequencies, and dispatchers would drive up the cost considerably. Lodi and the other SJCRFDA members have spent millions of tax dollars over the last several years to upgrade our communications equipment to a state of the art P25 compliant UHF digital radio system that accommodates both police and fire with multiple repeaters throughout their cities. While we recognize that the previously referenced financial struggles of the smaller entities are likely the cause of this lower level of service, it simply does not make

sense to force better funded agencies to suffer the lower VHF standard, especially when the expense of meeting the higher standard has already been incurred by SJCRFDA members.

The Report notes that The City of Stockton CAD technology is aging, but fails to recognize that Stockton is replacing its CAD technology which, once completed by the end of this year, will allow Stockton dispatch and Authority member agencies to more seamlessly communicate and dispatch calls. Moreover, while we agree Automated Vehicle Location (AVL) technology is important, the Report does not recognize that Stockton's technology updates in progress contemplate and include the integration of AVL which will allow dispatch to track and dispatch the closest emergency vehicles to the call location greatly enhancing the level of service to our citizens. As stated above, the Grand Jury may not have been aware that the largest agencies in the County have already purchased and installed AVL equipment.

Lastly, the Report identifies the difference in operation models and focuses on the fact that AMR is a "for-profit, non-governmental agency utilizing corporate employees." Unfortunately it appears the Grand Jury may not be aware that private company employees are able to strike in the event of a labor dispute. State law prohibits public agency emergency dispatcher employees from striking, meaning labor disputes will not disrupt the provision of emergency dispatch services provided by SJCRFDA. Moreover, the Report fails to recognize that a for profit model comes with incentives to reduce the level of service to maximize profits. The deployment of ambulances by AMR is a good example of this incentive. The north county is covered by a few ambulances that rotate based on call volumes and activities, and at times when calls in the south county are high, no ambulances are available or high response times occur. Conversely, the Lodi Fire Department serves the City of Lodi with a minimum of four full time units equipped to provide basic life support. Cost efficiency is certainly a laudable goal, but when it is the only goal, it can conflict with national standards and public expectations regarding response times to life threatening emergencies.

FINDINGS

Finding F1.2: *The vast majority of fire agencies are in favor of a single countywide emergency fire dispatch center; they agree it would be in the best interest of the citizens and the County of San Joaquin.*

Response: While it is true that the majority of fire agencies in the County of San Joaquin prefer belonging to the Joint Radio User Group (JRUG) dispatched through VRECC, owned and operated by AMR, the five remaining fire agencies belong to the San Joaquin County Regional Fire Dispatch Authority (SJCRFDA), are cities with either an urban or suburban response to emergency calls and represent 80% of the County call volume. SJCRFDA member agencies strongly support the public agency dispatch model. Most of the JRUG agencies are small county fire districts (with the exception the Cities of Ripon and Escalon) with one fire unit responding to considerably less calls for service annually

within a smaller rural footprint. The smaller fire agencies prefer VRECC because they are forced to prioritize cost per call over call efficiency due to poor funding. VRECC, which dispatches AMR Ambulance for medical transport, supports the shortfall it costs to run the Salida dispatch center with subsidies in order to meet the County EMS transport contract requirement that AMR also provide fire dispatch. Smaller fire agencies require less support from dispatch than their more urban/suburban counterparts that have multiple units responding to a significantly higher call volume requiring a more complex level of coordination and logistics.

The sheer number of calls that the five SJCRFDA member agencies run in a year, (over 80,000) representing over 80% of the emergency calls in the county, would greatly stress the VRECC dispatch system and its operation. If other agencies were to join VRECC it would require additional office space, dispatchers, dispatch equipment, radio channels, frequencies, and infrastructure thereby increasing the cost per call significantly. It is not at all clear that AMR would be financially able to continue to subsidize the cost of dispatching 80,000 additional calls if the larger cities were to join VRECC. Moreover, Lodi uses federally mandated modern UHF digital radio systems. VRECC utilizes VHF radio system to dispatch county fire agencies. The cost for the City of Lodi to abandon our newer UHF digital radio systems to revert back to the older non-P25-compliant VHF system in order to be dispatched by VRECC is not a wise use of taxpayer dollars.

The City of Lodi is well served by being dispatched through the City of Stockton fire dispatch center and is happy with the regional JPA that oversees dispatch operations. Each agency involved in SJCRFDA has one vote, giving each agency more oversight of the operations and expenditures incurred by the Stockton dispatch center. SJCRFDA has an operating agreement with the City of Stockton that requires Stockton to upgrade existing CAD equipment, and to maintain it throughout the term of the contract. Moreover, the surrounding county fire agencies dispatched by VRECC do not have the technology to communicate with our system. The City of Lodi has been lending UHF P25 compliant radios to the three smaller fire districts around us just to ensure that we can communicate during emergency situations. We also use dual band radios in our units that are programmed so they can communicate on both systems (UHF & VHF). Providing enhanced interoperability on our emergency scenes within the surrounding jurisdictions, increases safety for both firefighters and citizens we serve.

Finding F1.3: *There is disagreement as how to organize, operate and fund a single countywide fire dispatch capability. This has led to a failure to pursue creation of a single countywide fire dispatch center.*

Response: SJCRFDA was created with the goal of working toward a regional dispatch center that dispatches for all fire agencies and ambulance companies within San Joaquin County. SJCRFDA member agencies (City of Lodi, City of Manteca, Lathrop-Manteca Fire District, City of Stockton, and City of Tracy), comprising over 80% of the County's emergency call volume, have been advocates for a regional model that provides for the delivery of emergency and non-emergency dispatch services. All Countywide fire, ambulance, and law enforcement agencies are welcome to become a part of SJCRFDA.

Finding F2.2: *AVL on all fire vehicles and AVL capability at dispatch centers can reduce response times.*

Response: The City of Lodi is in complete agreement with this finding and has already purchased and installed AVL equipment on all of our fire units. When Stockton Fire's new CAD center is online (January 1, 2018) the City of Lodi will be fully operational utilizing AVL capabilities to assist in reducing response times to the citizens we serve.

Finding F3.1: *There is disagreement among San Joaquin County Fire Chiefs regarding EMS Policy 3202. Some believe EMS Policy 3202 does not allow responders to provide the level of service expected in their communities.*

Response: The Fire Chiefs who comprise the Board of Directors of the SJCRFDA have come to a consensus regarding EMS Policy 3202. Specifically, SJCRFDA members agree that each member's community through their elected representatives (City Councils and Fire Boards) have the sole authority for "Local Control" over their jurisdictions and have the sole responsibility to determine what level of response and fire department resources are required to meet the expectations of the citizens in the community it serves. This is not within the scope of the County EMS Director to determine. The County EMS Director is only responsible to ensure proper medical protocols are followed when medical treatment (ALS/BLS) is provided by the agency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation R.1.3: *By Dec. 31, 2017 County EMS in collaboration with the City of Stockton, the Joint Radio Users Group and the San Joaquin County Regional Fire Dispatch Authority develop a task force and provide a plan to consolidate into a single countywide emergency fire dispatch center.*

Response: The City of Lodi would be happy to collaborate with the City of Stockton, JRUG, and SJCRFDA to develop a plan to work toward consolidation into a single countywide emergency fire dispatch center. There are several examples of public sector

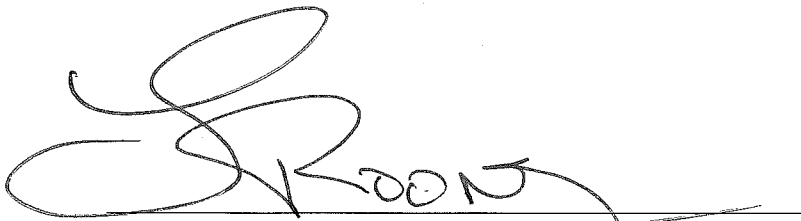
regional centers contiguous to San Joaquin County that can be used as model centers. However, it is Lodi's position that County EMS involvement in how local public agencies dispatch fire emergency response units overreaches the County's authority. Since the County is ultimately responsible for fire services provided by the smaller districts within the unincorporated areas of the County it has a strong incentive to favor the cost weighted VRECC model. The City of Lodi will work towards implementing this recommendation with an eye towards bringing the smaller fire agencies into the public dispatch model.

Recommendation R2.2: By December 31, 2017 all county fire agencies, develop a plan to fund, purchase and implement AVL on all emergency fire vehicles.

Response: All SJCRFDA fire agency members (including the City of Lodi) already have AVL equipment purchased, installed, and ready to go once Stockton has installed the new CAD system which is scheduled to be online January 1, 2018.

Although the City of Lodi disagrees with the majority of the findings and recommendations in the Report, we thank the Grand Jury, for its efforts to explore the needs of the County's emergency dispatch system and for the opportunity to provide comments.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "L. ROONEY", written over a horizontal line.

Larry Rooney, M.Ed., EFO, CFO, CPM
City of Lodi Fire Chief,
Chairman of the Board San Joaquin County Regional Fire Dispatch Authority